

You Can Tell the Surgeon

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3 In an old hospital, tucked between fields of tea,
4 three surgeons worked:
5 Quick Hands—his cuts were clean.
6 Heavy Hands—his touch unsure.
7 And the chief they both respected—
8 quiet as morning fog, never blaming,
9 even when things went wrong.
10 He often pressed a hand to his stomach,
11 as if remembering something the body never forgot.
12
13 After surgery, where do the organs go?
14 Quick Hands placed them in formalin.
15 Heavy Hands left them in the fridge.
16
17 Under the microscope:
18 Quick Hands' gallbladder—

19 epithelium like standing soldiers,
20 nuclei clear and alive.
21
22 Heavy Hands' gallbladder?
23 Where is the lining?
24 Dissolved, digested from within,
25 leaving a ghost of the edge—
26 a whisper in bile.
27
28 The pathologist said,
29 You can tell the surgeon
30 by the gallbladder.
31 —
32 One day, a gallbladder like porcelain—
33 rigid, white, silent.
34 “That was my boss's,” said Heavy Hands.
35
36 No epithelium remained.

37 The wall calcified—layer by layer,
38 from years of quiet pain,
39 inflammation folded into stone.

40

41 So many days holding it in,
42 so many years holding a scalpel.

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44 The pathologist said,
45 You can tell the surgeon
46 by the gallbladder.

47

48 **Note of explanation**

49 I wrote this poem as a pathologist reflecting on the tissues left behind after surgery. Years
50 ago, while in training at a hospital surrounded by tea fields, I examined a gallbladder that
51 had turned white and rigid—calcified, layer by layer. I had no idea whose it was. As I
52 looked through the microscope, one of the surgeons, a man whose technique I had quietly
53 studied over many cases, glanced over and said simply, “That was my boss’s.” In that
54 moment, I felt the long years held in the tissue—what hands had endured, and what

55 silence had cost. This poem is a gesture of respect for all surgeons, and for what their

56 work leaves behind.

57 I read tissues for a living, as a pathologist specializing in diagnostic pathology at Kyoto

58 University Hospital in Kyoto, Japan.

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